by Danny McCue

JERRY WEXLER

A Legendary Record Producer Recalls Atlantic's Glory Years

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Until the day that he joined Atlantic Records in the early '50s, Jerry Wexler had little experience in making records, let alone hit records. His only substantial music business experience up to that point had come in covering the music beat for *Billboard* magazine, but he had always loved the blues, was an avid record collector, and had been instrumental in having the "Race Music" charts renamed "Rhythm and Blues." On the night of his first day on the job at Atlantic he ran his first session. The artist was Clyde McPhatter.

In those days, sessions were held in the office shared by Wexler and (company co-founder with Herb Abramson) Ahmet Ertegun, at the then rather small company's headquarters on West 56th Street. They'd put one desk on top of another, set up the microphones and a few lawn chairs, and that was their studio. From such an inauspicious setting Wexler went on to produce some of the greatest black stars of the 1950s; besides McPhatter there was LaVern Baker, Joe Turner, the Clovers and Ruth Brown.

Later, after hearing the earliest recordings of Otis Redding, he forged a distribution and production deal with Stax Records in Memphis. In short order Wexler emerged as the premier producer of that hybrid of R&B called soul, producing a string of hits by such artists as Solomon Burke, Joe Tex, Ray Charles, Wilson Pickett and, of course, the legendary, ground-breaking recordings of Aretha Franklin.

The hallmark of Wexler's production style was the way in which he nurtured the artists he worked with, listening not only to what they sang, but to what they thought, coddling them, chastening them when he had to. Most of the people who were around at the time recall a deep-seated mutual respect between Wexler and the musicians with whom he worked in the studio.

By the time Atlantic's emphasis began to shift in the late '60s from R&B to the rock of the Rascals, Cream and, later, Led Zeppelin, Wexler had discovered and helped develop not only Stax, but also a studio in the tiny hamlet of Muscle Shoals, Alabama as well. His efforts to mine the very best of the southern music scene continued into the '70s.

After hearing Duane Allman play on a few sessions at Muscle Shoals, most notably the session that produced Wilson Pickett's cover of "Hey Jude," he bought out Allman's contract from studio owner Rick Hall, by doing so allowing the Allman Brothers Band to reform and find success on Capricorn Records, another venture in which Wexler had a sizable hand.

When first approached about this interview, Wexler was skeptical: "I'm not interested in doing it for the greater glory; you know what I mean." A week later I called him back. His answer was characteristically direct: "Let's do it."

While in later years Wexler has been instrumental in the signings of the B-52's and the Gang of Four to Warner Brothers, and he dabbled successfully in work for both film and the stage (he received an Oscar nomination for Best Adapted Score for Louis Malles' *Pretty Baby,* and co-produced the off-Broadway hit *One Mo' Time*), one thing has remained constant: his love for what he refers to later in this interview as the "holy trinity": blues, gospel and jazz. Aretha Franklin has called him "one of the giants of R&B." There is no doubting her word.

Goldmine: How did you go from being someone whose primary experience with music had been as a fan, to someone who could assess a performer's talent and produce them?

Jerry Wexler: Well, okay, there's some background in that I was a record collector, a devout record collector. I used to hang out at the Commodore record shop and I used to make the local music scene on 52nd Street, down in the Village, in Harlem, after hours and so on . . . and I always had a band of record collector friends who were into the same thing.

For example, Milt Gabler, who managed Benny Goodman, had a very good jazz store down in Soho and was down there to receive and accept Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald . . . and Milt would also hold these little seminars to educate the people who were hanging out at the time. He really was a focal point for what was happening at that time.

We would collect records, which is not the same as going over to Sam Goody's or Tower Records with their stacks and stacks of records; in those days you really had to search: Salvation Army stores, places that had "Mad Dog" signs in the window. You'd have to yell through the crack of the door, "I'm the record guy." So, the grounding was tremendously motivated.

You also tended to specialize in those days, defining for yourself where your area of interest was, and that had to be indiscriminating. So what were the abilities or the traits that allowed me to produce records? Well, a lot of kids today, let's say are into heavy metal, or punk, or hardcore the way that I was into rhythm 'n' blues in the '40s. That doesn't necessarily mean, with all the passion they bring to it, that they could operate the machinery. You have to be able to identify that spark, records that will catch on, that will sell, to identify who will be . . . the next Beatles, you know, the next Otis Redding.

It still takes somebody at the other end of it to isolate and define those qualities that go into a record that will sell. People say, "Hey, I knew that hit was a hit the minute it came on the radio," as though that was a qualification for being part of the team that makes the record. It's absurd. By the time that song got on to the radio and that person heard that record, it had gone through a very long process of simplification, weeding out, discriminating and then of doing whatever it took to put it together.

You know, people would say, "Hey man, I knew that Ray Charles was going to be fantastic from hearing his records," forgetting that he had gone through years of travail and labor before he even got to that point.

What I'm doing is defining your question, not answering it.

I don't know what the answer is, except that I can tell you this: In those days, the early '50s, people were coming to pop with their own ideas and sensibilities independent of the record companies. That's pretty much what we're talking about here. Somebody once asked me to what did I attribute my success at Atlantic Records, was it management? No. Was it this thing or that thing? No. Well then, what then were the qualities? Well, the qualities were taste, probity and intelligence. That's a mighty big brag, right?

Goldmine: Right. (Laughter)

Jerry Wexler: But, as Dizzy Dean once said, "If you can do it, it's not bragging." Those were the attributes, I think, that people who endured in this business had. Look at the competition Atlantic had. In the beginning, there were so many: Alad-

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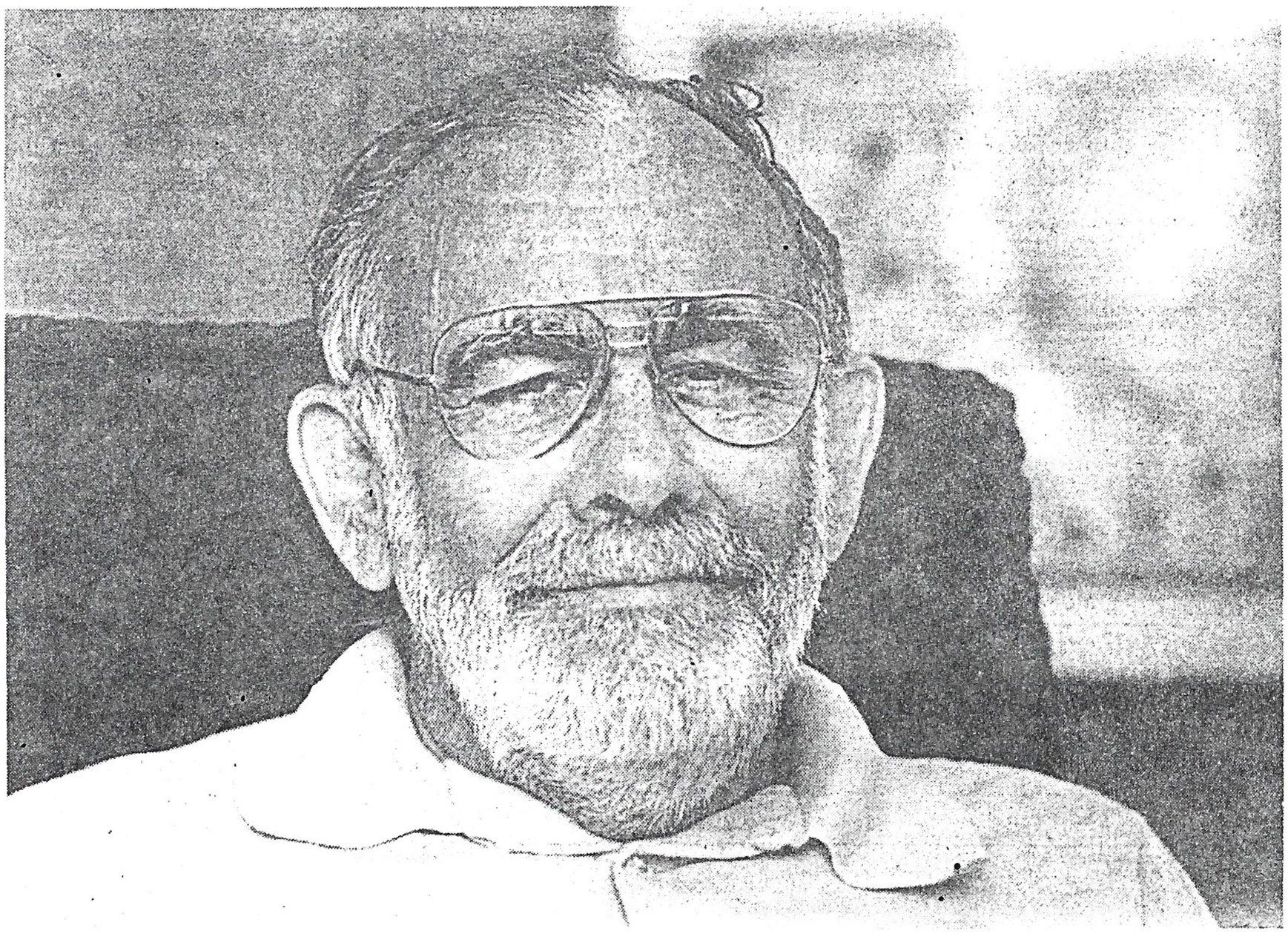

Ahmet Ertegun, Jerry Wexler, Big Joe Turner. Photo courtesy Greg Geller.

Jerry Wexler, Ruth Brown, Clyde McPhatter, Lavern Baker, Ahmet Ertegun. Photo courtesy Greg Geller.

From Atlantic's inauspicious headquarters on West 56th Street, Wexler went on to produce some of the greatest black stars of the 1950s; besides Clyde McPhatter there was Lavern Baker, Joe Turner, the Clovers and Ruth Brown.

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Top, left to right: Buddy Johnson, Norman Orleck of 'Cashbox,' Ella Johnson, Big Joe Turner, Lou Willie Turner, Jackie Freed. Bottom: Jerry Wexler, Alan Freed, Ahmet Ertegun. Taken at St. Nicholas Arena, New York City, circa 1955. Photo courtesy Greg Geller.

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din, Specialty, Modern, I could go on and on. Chess . . . they're all gone. There isn't one that's still around and has its own identity.

Goldmine: MCA is reissuing Chess now. What did you think of what they were doing at the time?

Jerry Wexler: Chess was a fantastic record label. So was Stax later on.

Goldmine: Now, you weren't a founder of Atlantic Records. They had already been around a while when you came aboard.

Jerry Wexler: Exactly. I came in in 1953.

Goldmine: What did you learn from Ahmet Ertegun?

Jerry Wexler: Oh, a great deal. Let me put it this way, there was no state-of-the-art in production at that point, so what I picked up from Ahmet were the rudiments, the technical part, tracking, layering, setting up the microphones, because that was all there was at the time. What we were able to learn, we learned strictly from actually recording people like Ray Charles.

When it came to recording, we had two jobs, to nurture what was going on out there in the room on the other side of the glass and to catch that on tape. Now, that second one is really an engineering function, having to do with fidelity and microphones, seeing that there is no tape hiss to interfere with the sound. Much of that was handled by Tom Dowd. I never got very good at that. I mean, I'm not a hands-on person on the board to this day, but I didn't have to be because I had Tom Dowd. My emphasis and focus was on seeing if I could help it happen out in the studio.

Goldmine: I read somewhere that in trying to illustrate a particular rhythm pattern, you went in and danced that pattern in front of the musicians in the Stax rhythm section.

Jerry Wexler: Oh yeah, right. You know, the best way to sum it up is to say that my idea of the hallmark of the record business is it calls on other things being submersed in it. You have to be able to change the music when it's required. That takes nerve, that takes imagination, and it takes confidence, because you've got the best musicians in the world out there playing on the session for scale and you're going out there and you're saying, change this, make it faster or slower, or change the accent. I mean, when you sing a little bass line to Ron Carter you better have it together. That's what it's all about.

The other side of that, quite frankly, is that we owned the company. We signed the checks (laughs), but that still doesn't cut it with musicians; you have to win that confidence from them, so that when you tell them something, they should take it very seriously, and ponder and deliberate.

Goldmine: One of the first people you produced was LaVern Baker, one of the more well known victims of the "cover system." (Several of the songs cut by Baker, a black woman, were re-cut by white singers, whose efforts were then promoted by their labels and became bigger hits.) How did you strive to combat that?

Jerry Wexler: One way to combat it was to make sure we had the copyright so at the very least we could be guaranteed a royalty from the cover artist. The only thing that has happened is that time has sorted all that out now. Who cares about Georgia Gibbs' covers of LaVern Baker's originals? You know what I'm saying? That doesn't put any butter on LaVern Baker's grits right now, that's true.

I don't think we could fight the system. The most you could do was rage and rant. It was an absolutely racist system in which we had one simple, irreputable difficulty and that was that white radio stations wouldn't play our black records. Now from a historic perspective, people today say, "Oh, man, I used to love those LaVern Baker records." That's a damned lie, because they didn't buy them.

Herb Abramson, Jerry Wexler, Ahmet Ertegun, Clyde McPhatter. Photo courtesy Greg Geller.

Something like 90 percent of the people who bought those records were black, except for highly evolved blues and jazz fans and record collectors and that was not enough to sustain them. Society had to become educated to this music and it was educated by some British boys with long hair. They were the ones that brought Muddy Waters' music and Ivory Joe Hunter's music to the masses of American kids. They went out and found Bo Diddley, and Ike and Tina, and B.B. King and presented them. Muddy Waters thanked them publicly.

Jerry Wexler: No, absolutely not, because part of Ray Charles' genius is the editing factor. Self-editing. In fact, the editing and elimination of the superfluous is one of his great hallmarks. You know, when somebody is singing the blues with an accompaniment, the greatest accompaniment stays out of the way and who better to fill that role than yourself? So that is the foundation of everything Ray Charles did with us.

It's an article of faith not to have too much going on and have conflicting lines going against each other. This is going to get a little technical. You sit down with the harmonic structure of the song after it's written out in chords, chord changes, so you can jump from one chord to another. In the early days that was maybe all that people did when backing up, say Elvis Presley.

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-Jerry Wexler

Jerry Wexler, Ahmet Ertegun, Ruth Brown. Photo courtesy Greg Geller.

What we are dealing with is a constituency of basically insentient squares. That's our record market and the evolved few, as is always going to be the case, are the keepers of the flame. That's why all those record companies disappeared, because that's not enough.

Goldmine: Did you see the covers coming? Were you tipped off in advance of discovering them on the radio?

Jerry Wexler: It all depends. Sometimes we'd get the word, other times an engineer would call us and say that they were playing our record in the booth, trying to get the cover band to get the sound down, and how did we do this or achieve that? We'd complain about it, but what good would it do?

Goldmine: You've worked with people that you could actually apply the word genius to.

Jerry Wexler: Ray Charles and Aretha Franklin, those are the two, and maybe Bob Dylan.

Goldmine: When you work with a Ray Charles, do you find that it's possible for that person to have too many good ideas, ideas that would only appeal to that rarefied group you mentioned earlier? Do you have to play the role of the limiting factor?

You didn't do all that much except lay down the harmonic substructure, but music required more later on as it got more involved; it required rhythm patterns and texturing. The texture is what nourishes you. The high and low ends of the spectrum and what's in the middle, but now you have to be careful to have enough fabric to cut yourself a suit, while not allowing it to turn into a tent. So when we recorded down in Muscle Shoals and Memphis in the mid-'50s, you'd come in with a song for the musicians, you'd give them the chord changes, they'd start playing with that and then somebody would come up with a riff and we'd start working off that.

The obverse of all this is Phil Spector's wall of sound. Now, that was another way to go and Phil made it work by having a tremendous amount of lines going at once. The key was to realize that you couldn't just make any kind of sound, you had to have a known overtone with its own resonance and limitations. Even with Phil, you have to have the substructure to make it work.

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Goldmine: Phil Spector was under contract to Atlantic at one time yet his success came later, after he left you. Do you think it came about because he found that sound?

Jerry Wexler: No. Phil Spector always had the ability, the brilliance; he always had it. It was just a question of luck, or bad luck maybe, that it didn't emerge during the period he was with us. Maybe we didn't provide him with the proper framework that would keep him nourished, maybe we just didn't have him at the right time.

It's the same with Ashford and Simpson. Ahmet spotted them early on and we signed them up as songwriters and producers and nothing came of it commensurate with their talent. They then went on and wrote all those hits for Motown. A lot of it is timing and luck.

Goldmine: What can you tell us about your role in finding the talent? Everybody at Atlantic seemed to play the dual role of whatever their job was and A&R person.

Jerry Wexler: I don't call that A&R. I don't know what A&R is anymore. A great record producer, Ralph Buss, called it "finding the bodies." That's the prime function in the record business because if you find the right body, somehow the record will get made. You know, today, all the kudos go to the record producers; I think that's arrogant bullshit. I mean, Seymour Stein, they should give him the earth for finding Madonna and the Talking Heads and all those other people. I think the credit should go to the people who found Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith and Hank Williams, Ray Charles and Bob Dylan. Those people are the ones that deserve the awards; that's why John Hammond stands above everybody else. Look at the enormous amount of talent he found. The industry is moving away from recognizing that now. A&R, if you want to call it that, is now under the domination of the promotions department. To me, that's outrageous.

Goldmine: While Atlantic became the home of soul, Motown began producing "the sound of Young America." Why do you think there was that twist that enabled Motown to be sold directly to white teenagers?

Jerry Wexler: That was Berry Gordy's genius. He saw this thing and somehow knew how to do it and he knew that these little mini-soap operas, these 36-bar songs, would have great power and he found a way to put it together.

Goldmine: Did you ever reach a point when mixing down things like "In The Midnight Hour" when you said to yourself "Well, that's it. This is never going to get old."

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Jerry Wexler: No, never. I never said that. I always thought maybe a record would sell, maybe it wouldn't, but as far as thinking in terms of a timeless masterpiece for the ages, never. I mean, you got more excited about some records than others, but that's only a question of degree. One of the records that turned me on instantly, not a record I made, but a master that was cut in Muscle Shoals, was "When A Man Loves A Woman," by Percy Sledge. I got super-excited when that came in. I called Ahmet in Europe and said, "Man, you won't believe this."

Goldmine: How influenced were you by the other things being recorded in the '60s? You were producing some of your biggest hits at a time when there was a surf sound, the San Francisco sound, Motown, the British Invasion. How much did that influence your sound?

Jerry Wexler: I didn't pay much attention to it. It just, I mean, I didn't study it. It would just bounce off me. My influences stayed what they always had been, which was blues, gospel and jazz, the holy trinity. You could listen to our records from that period. Wouldn't you say that we sort of remained in our own groove?

Goldmine: I would. When you listen to those records, do you listen to any particular parts?

Jerry Wexler: I love listening to Steve Cropper's guitar, because it's so sneaky, you know, I just can't say enough about Steve Cropper and what he did. It's like playing lead and rhythm at the same time and sneaking in those openings and knowing when to come in and when to back off. He's also got a great tone. There's also the cohesion of the rhythm section. It's cohesion, but also at the same time projection — it has to be acknowledged — and also relaxation, the dynamics of shading from soft to loud, which unfortunately are not conspicuous in rock 'n' roll.

Goldmine: Tell us about your relationship with Bob Dylan.

Jerry Wexler: The reason he came to me when he had already had all the success of his early career was because he wanted to change his sound. He told me many years ago, "Man, I've done the word trip, I want to do the music trip now." He was struggling at that time and there was no thought that I was ever going to produce a record with him. We were just hanging out. I was able to notice watching from the sidelines, his absolute veneration for great musicians. I mean he loved people like Willie Nelson and Dr. John, he had a special affection for them and I was knocked out by his ability and knowledge of everything that was going on around him.

Goldmine: Did you ever work with the Stones directly?

Jerry Wexler: No, but I was in the studio in Muscle Shoals when they did the sessions that "Wild Horses" came out of and I was really struck by the ability of Keith and Mick as producers. They are absolutely fantastic record producers, the whole bit; they write the songs, they know how to put rhythm tracks together, how to make it exciting. I don't think anybody knows how really fantastic they are.

Goldmine: Are there any artists around now who excite you the way Aretha did?

Jerry Wexler: Alive? Well, exciting is a big word. You have to eliminate categories of music.

Goldmine: How do you feel about what Prince is doing?

Jerry Wexler: I think he's good and I think he's ingenious, but I'm a little confused by the melding of theater and music. Prince is really terrific, but the promulgating of sexual ambiguity, I don't know what that has got to do with music. I used to love Little Richard, whether he was in a gay period or a straight period, because whatever he was, that's what he was. The idea of affecting sexual ambiguity to sell your music troubles me. I'll tell you, I think one of the great examples of rock theater coupled with the preservation of purity is Lou Reed. It's just organic.●

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